

Gov. DeSantis, we hear you. Now, let's see it

Editorial

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The Sadowski Coalition is a group of 32 statewide organizations that speak for millions of Floridians. Its focus is affordable housing. This week it has asked Gov. Ron DeSantis to practice what he preached.

DeSantis' budget — as opposed to the House and Senate versions — recommended all the money directed by law into the State and Local Housing Trust Funds, be spent on a variety of initiatives aimed at making the promise and dignity of home ownership a reality for the state's workforce.

According to the University of Florida's Shimberg Center, 744,662 low-income renters paid more than 40 percent of their earnings for housing in 2015 — a 35-percent increase from 2005.

The Sadowski Trust Fund was created in 1992 by the state legislature with a 10-cent surcharge on \$100 paid on real estate transactions. That was doubled to 20 cents in 1995. Since that time it's estimated that the legislature has "swept" the fund of around \$1.5 billion dollars for schemes and projects that have nothing to do with housing our workforce. It's de rigueur.

The two funds are the State Apartment Incentive Loan Program (SAIL) and the State Initiatives Partnership Program (SHIP). The \$1.5 billion loss to affordable housing is misleading. These programs generally leverage that money several times over with other funding avenues, private-sector investment and even sweat equity of citizen groups, who may come together for something as small as adding a wheelchair ramp to a senior's single-wide trailer.

This year, in the budget sent to Gov. DeSantis the trust fund pie is sliced like this: \$115 million for Hurricane Michael recovery; \$85 million for affordable housing needs in the state; and it sweeps \$125 million into general revenue, predominately so lawmakers can crow once again, "No new taxes." But that's sleight of hand or, more pointedly, theft.

The Sadowski Coalition has not asked DeSantis to veto the dollars for hurricane recovery. But it does remind him that federal dollars, though syrup-slow, will be coming to the Panhandle — and federal laws permits a system of reimbursement from Community Development Block Grants. The \$115 million will be recouped, but would you imagine it will go back to the trust fund from which it came?

DeSantis told reporters early on that he would recommend all housing trust fund dollars be spent on their intended purpose. Florida Housing Coalition CEO Jamie Ross said at the time, "This is a sea of change in leadership from the Governor's Office."

We've been impressed with Gov. DeSantis in his first few months. We don't agree with some of his initiatives, but have taken notice of his propensity to mean what he says — and stand up to the legislative arm of state government when he does. Having a straight-shooter in the Governor's Mansion is a sea of change in itself.

These funds are not a giveaway. They're not free housing. The programs are both flexible and accountable. And they work.

We ask Gov. DeSantis to veto the \$125 million sweep of affordable housing funds and allow them to sail on this sea of change with a heading toward making a better Florida — and making state lawmakers uphold their own laws.

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